



Oral Performance/Aural Traditions:
Cultural Identity in David Henry
Hwang's *Trying to Find Chinatown*

by Karen M. Dabney

Presented at the William Inge Theatre Festival.

April 16, 2013

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I would like to thank the William Inge Festival for inviting me to share my work on David Henry Hwang's *Trying to Find Chinatown*. My presentation begins with the end. I would like to perform for you the final monologue from the short play:

When I finally found Doyers Street, I scanned the buildings for Number 13. Walking down an alley where the scent of freshly steamed char siu bao lingered in the air, I felt immediately that I had entered a world where all things were finally familiar. (Pause) An old woman bumped me with her shopping bag – screaming to her friend in Cantonese, though they walked no more than a few inches apart. Another man – shouting to a vendor in Sze-Yup. A youth, in white undershirt, perhaps a recent newcomer, bargaining with a grocer in Hokkien. I walked through this ocean of dialects, breathing in the richness with deep gulps, exhilarated by the energy this symphony brought to my step. And when I finally saw the number 13, I nearly wept at my good fortune. An old tenement, paint peeling, inside walls no doubt thick with a century of grease and broken dreams – and yet, to me, a temple – the house where my father was born. I suddenly saw it all: Gung Gung, coming home from his sixteen-hour days pressing shirts he could never afford to own, bringing with him candies for my father, each sweet wrapped in the hope of a better life. When my father left the ghetto, he swore he would never return. But he had, this day, in the thoughts and memories of his son, just six months after his death. And as I sat on the stoop, I pulled a hua-moi from my pocket, sucked on it, and felt his spirit returning. To this place where his ghost, and the dutiful hearts of all his descendants, would always call home. (He listens for a long moment) And I felt an ache in my heart for all those lost souls, denied this most important of revelations: to know who they truly are (Hwang 294).

In David Henry Hwang's *Trying to Find Chinatown*, a ten-minute play originally produced in 1996 as part of the 20th Annual Humana Festival of New American Plays, a Chinese-American street musician and a Caucasian Midwesterner engage in a dialogue on a New York City street

corner. An innocent request for directions launches a confrontation about cultural stereotypes and ethnic identity. The two men, unrestricted by their racial and ethnic heritages, are influenced and inspired by a culture of sound.

Several years ago in grad school, I acted in an all-female production of Hwang's short play. The role of Benjamin, the Caucasian Kansan, and this final monologue, in particular, served as breakthroughs for me in my own exploration of heritage and personal identity. Before my introduction to *Trying to Find Chinatown*, I didn't know who I truly was because I felt I lacked any definitive cultural or ethnic traditions or customs. David Henry Hwang's brief but brave evaluation of cultural identity and stereotypes helped me to know myself, to accept my particular cultural and familial heritage and honor its influence on my personal identity.

Central to my performance was acknowledging that my character's cultural identity was rooted in family traditions, not merely ethnic inheritance. When I performed the final speech of the play, I recalled the sounds of my own family, my own heritage: the loud chatter in my Grandparents' living room while a KU basketball game was on TV, the clanking of pots and dishes in the kitchen mixed with the gossiping of women hovering over the oven, the pounding of little footsteps running throughout the house, the barking of startled dogs whenever the doorbell would ring, and the slamming of the screen door to the garage each time someone left to fetch more soda. Acting in this production allowed me to understand and appreciate my cultural heritage, one rooted in the musicality of my childhood.

Hwang has been a successful and prolific playwright in American theater because his plays often utilize ancient elements of oral performance and ritual to help raise questions about cultural identity in contemporary America. While substantial work has been done on his greatest commercial successes, I wish to explore one of David Henry Hwang's shorter plays, *Trying to*

Find Chinatown. The play's characters exist beyond inherited culture, which highlights Hwang's concept of fluidity of identity.

Before exploring this notion of perpetually shifting identities, it is necessary to discuss the role of community in the formation of one's cultural identity. Mia Tuan distinguishes racial identity from ethnic identity – race is determined by physical appearance while ethnicity is based on cultural markers such as national origin, language, and food (Tuan 21). A common problem Asian Americans encounter is generic racial identification by outsiders, rather than precise recognition of their ancestral and ethnic roots. Henry Bial reminds us that 'much of what we call culture is in fact performance. A community's performances reflect and embody its values, beliefs, and traditions' (Bial 321). The connection between culture and performance helps to explain the importance of theater in developing community and maintaining cultural customs. Intergenerational knowledge, the passing of traditions and stories from one generation to the next, is vital to the development and retention of culture (Kockel and Nic Craith 138), (Vansina 8). This education, both familial and communal, can be relayed in many forms. Oral histories, ancestor worship, and ancient storytelling are just a few examples.

Direct involvement in oral storytelling established one's relationship to the world, connecting to one's environment and community through myths and epic lore (Foley 48). These performances always engaged the senses. Sound played a central role in ancestral tales and communal ritual gatherings: the musicality of the storyteller's voice, the dancer's rhythmical movements, or a shaman's trance-like chanting was experienced and absorbed. Throughout China's history, music has been 'associated with ritual and ceremonial observances besides being regarded as a necessary factor in the education of the community' (Scott 41). Oral

transmission and aural reception, therefore, played significant roles in the history of ritual and oral performance.

Asian American family memoirs emphasize the importance of interconnectivity between generations, reflecting familial and national histories within the formation of individual identity (Davis 183). A reoccurring symbol in family memoirs and treatises on Chinese-American identity has been Chinatown, the cultural epicenter of Chinese customs found in major metropolitan cities. For the Chinese population, Chinatown serves as a connection to ancestral roots. Sau-ling Wong calls it a ‘locus of familiarity, security, and nurturance’ while ‘the century-old ethnic colony immediately aroused’ Miz Zhou’s curiosity when she first arrived in New York (Davis 103), (Zhou 1). In contrast, for some Chinese-Americans, Bruce Edward Hall for instance, Chinatown is a place of culture and tradition not always present in their assimilated lives:

I yearned for that connection to a place. Chinatown was the only constant in my life...I could always return to familiar surroundings see the thumbprints of generations that had died before living memory...it was a place with tradition, with customs...It was a place that America hadn't homogenized out of existence, and there one could smell the village where the Ancestors had lived for perhaps a thousand years before (Hall 2).

Chinatown is a protected enclave of Chinese culture – sights, smells, and sounds emanate through the crowded streets. Ancient traditions continue to be practiced and ghosts of ancestors welcome Chinese-Americans to reunite with their ethnic heritage.

Though Chinatown carries an open invitation to cultural (re)immersion, some Chinese-Americans of mixed race struggle with their identity. While the community acknowledges their heritage, outsiders often force them to question where they fit into American society. Lisa See

recounts “I thought I was Chinese. It stood to reason, as all those people were my relatives. I had never paid much attention to the fact that I had red hair...though physically I don’t look Chinese, like my grandmother, I am Chinese in my heart” (See xx). This conflict raises the current need for broadening definitions of identity. Stuart Hall proposes to think of identity, not as an ‘accomplished fact’ but as a ‘production which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation (Mao and Young 200)’ . Many contemporary Chinese-Americans believe in the idea of self-identification. Joane Nagel advocates agency in choosing how one defines oneself when constructing one’s own identity:

It is important that we discard the notion that culture is simply an historical legacy, culture is not a shopping cart that comes to us already loaded with a set of historical cultural goods. Rather, we construct culture by picking and choosing items from the shelves of the past and the present (Tuan 64-5).

Jolivette Mecnas agrees with Nagel, emphasizing the magical and pleasurable aspects of constantly reshaping one’s identity as if it were an ‘open-ended question’ (Mao and Young 199).

Similarly, David Henry Hwang believes in the fluidity of identity versus rigid racial or ethnic boundaries. In an interview with Bonnie Lyons, Hwang feels all his work in some way “explores the idea that who we are is the result of circumstance, the result of things that are not necessarily inherent but instead come out of our interaction with our contacts” (Lyons). The playwright questions the efficacy of judging someone based merely on superficial qualities or genetic markers: “It’s kind of the arbitrariness of racial mythology the way in which one makes certain assumptions based on this kind of exterior covering and these features which may or may not have anything to do with the person that’s within (Maufort 372).” Hwang stresses his belief that culture is not static, “culture is what people create at any given time, culture lives and

changes” (Lyons). All of his works confront the inefficacy of fixed ethnic identity (Dong 105). As an alternative to such outdated ideology, Hwang offers insight into the fluidity of identity.

Both of the characters in *Trying to Find Chinatown* are forced to define themselves. The Caucasian man introduces himself: “Benjamin Wong. I forget that a society wedded to racial constructs constantly forces me to explain my very existence (Hwang 290).” Superficial judgments inhibit others from embracing Benjamin as an Asian-American. Similarly, Ronnie Chang introduces himself with a disclaimer. His alias “The Bow Man” is an attempt to infiltrate automatic racial assumptions by providing a moniker completely dissociated from his ethnic heritage (Hwang 290). Benjamin desires to be socially accepted and identified as a Chinese-American while Ronnie clearly defines himself by his musical heritage, “you can’t judge my race by my genetic heritage alone”. Ronnie isn’t rejecting the notion of cultural heritage; he merely explains to Benjamin the limitations of staying within color lines. He employs a vocabulary Benjamin can relate to as an Asian Studies major to better appreciate his struggle with self-identification:

Now, tell me, could any legacy be more rich, more crowded with mythology and heroes to inspire pride? What can I say if the banging of a gong or the clinking of a pickax on the Transcontinental Railroad fails to move me even as much as one note, played through a violin MIDI controller by Michael Urbaniak? Does it have to sound like Chinese opera before people like you decide I know who I am?

Ronnie worships his ancestors, musical legends whose stories and skills are passed down generation after generation. *Trying to Find Chinatown* concludes with Benjamin’s soliloquy about finding his father’s childhood home and communing with the ghosts of his ancestors – the piece I just performed.

This one act play is rooted in a culture of sound. Beyond race and ethnic lines, the characters identify with the musicality of their environments. For Ronnie, it's the jazz, blues, and rock 'n roll which provide the foundation for his values and beliefs; for Benjamin, it's the 'ocean of dialects', the 'symphony' of voices and traditional Chinese music which guide his decisions in life. The characters are products of both oral and aural traditions. Hwang's use of sound allows viewers to look beyond racial stereotypes for an all-encompassing understanding of identity. By opening their ears, the audience can hear the two men's stories.

Appreciating one's cultural heritage is the first step in solidifying one's identity. Better said by another Hwang character, from *Family Devotions*, "you must become one with your family before you can hope to live away from it (Hwang 126)". In *Trying to Find Chinatown*, David Henry Hwang brings awareness to the modern reality of cultural pluralism as it pertains to issues of identity and acknowledges individual agency in choosing how one's identity constantly evolves. Raised and nurtured in a culture of sound, both characters carry on their legacies through oral performance and aural traditions.

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